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AUTHOR	Crocker, Elvira Valenzuela
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ABSTRACT

Hispanic women earn less, own fewer businesses, and are less represented in politics than almost any other population segment, and their history of low educational attainment is a key factor for each of these realities. In 1981, while 69% of the total population completed four or more years of high school, only 42% of the Hispanic females reached the same level. With an average of 10.2 years of schooling, Hispanas lag behind Black females at 11.9 and white females at 12.5 average years of schooling. The pattern continues at the college level, with Hispanic females less likely than Black or white females to complete four or more years of college. Because of scarce data, it is difficult to quantify the reasons for the low educational attainment level among Hispanics. Economic need, language barriers, family responsibility, and educator attitudes are all contributors to the high Latina dropout rate, which is twice as high as the national rate of 16%. Moreover, because of the absence of female and Hispanic leadership in education, Hispanic high school women lack role models and suffer from inadequate counseling. Vocational education enrollments clearly show that Hispanas are being steered into life cycles with little career or income potential. In Denver, for example, young women make up 44% of the total vocational enrollment, but 90% of these end up in home economics and clerical jobs, with little career potential and low pay. Nationally, technical courses are dominated by white males (82.9%), with a tiny enrollment of Hispanas (1.8%). For the nation's Hispanas, solutions (such as increased parental involvement) are urgently needed. (KH)

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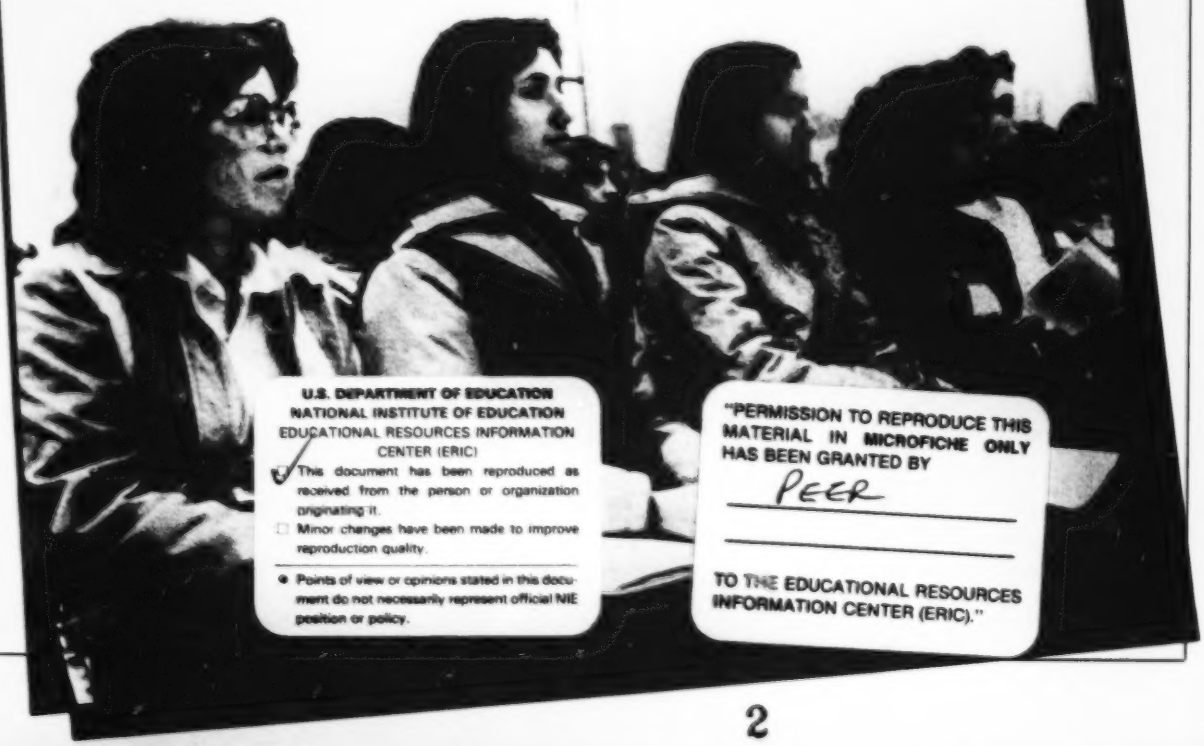
The Report Card On Educating Hispanic Women



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"Hispanic women consistently have had less opportunity to receive an education . . . It is an indictment of our education system that Hispanic women are in this secondary position of influence."

Polly Baca-Barragan,
Colorado State Senator

America's burgeoning Hispanic population has become a popular topic among political analysts, news commentators and social scientists. Demographers predict that the Hispanic population is soon to become the nation's largest minority group, with estimates varying between 15 and 20 million. Trend-watchers have noted that the Hispanic population differs from other groups in one significant way—age. Four in ten Hispanics—42% to be precise—are under 18.[1] For this group, America's public school system is the institution with the biggest impact on its chances for success.

Forecasters rarely focus on a second major segment of the Hispanic population: Hispanic women. Of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American origins, Hispanic women wield almost no clout using the traditional measures of influence. Consider that:

- Hispanic females earn 49 cents to every dollar earned by a white male in the U.S.—10 cents less than white women and 24 cents less than Hispanic males.[2]
- Hispanic women's median income in 1981 averaged only $5,060. Over half (53%) of the Hispanic families headed by women lived in poverty.[3]
- Only 2.6% of the 701,957 businesses owned by women in the U.S. in 1977 were owned by Hispanic women. White women owned 94.1% of these businesses, and 3.8% were owned by Black women.[4]
- Of the 170 Hispanic Congressional and state elected public officials and national and state level appointees, only 8 are female.[5]

The Educational Bottleneck

A history of low educational attainment for Hispanas is a key factor in each of these grim realities. In 1981, while 69% of the total population completed four or more years of high school, only 42% of the Hispanic females reached the same level.[6] With an average of 10.2 years of schooling, Hispanas lag behind both Black females at 11.9 and white females at 12.5 average years of schooling.[7] The pattern continues at the college level with Hispanic females less likely than Black or white females to complete four or more years of college. According to the 1980 Census, 1 in 6 Americans completed four or more years of college while only 1 in 17 Hispanic women completed the same. While the average years of schooling for Hispanic females and males (10.4 years) are almost the same, and they complete four or more years of high school at the same rate, a gap appears at the college level. Almost two Hispanic males complete four or more years of college for every one Hispanic female.[8]

This situation is changing very slowly. "Hispanas are the only group of women today who have not made significant education advances in the last few decades," says Leo Estrada, associate professor of urban planning at the University of Southern California at Los Angeles. "Latinas have moved behind," concludes Estrada, (who is currently analyzing a survey on the employment practices of Latinas), "while Black women have gone dramatically forward and whites continue to advance steadily."

Education is closely related to employment status and earning power. An analysis of the role of Latinas in the job market illustrates that limited educational achievement has grave long term consequences.

More than half (52%) of all Hispanic women in the labor market are in low paying, blue-collar jobs.[9] The remaining 48%, counted as white-collar workers, are mostly clerical and other office workers. Only 8% of all Hispanas in the white collar jobs are professional and technical workers.

The importance of educational attainment to Hispanic women is aptly described by Raydean Acevedo, president of the Mexican American Women's National Association (MANA):

Given today's trends, the current state of the economy, and the fact that one in every five Hispanic families is headed by a female, it is not unreasonable to expect that more and more Latinas will be in the work force of the future. But a tight economy and fewer jobs are going to increase job competition. Our women have to be able to compete in that job market.

Dropout Rates

We're dropping out of school at phenomenal rates. The system has failed us miserably.

Maria Van Hoy
National Conference of
Puerto Rican Women

The reasons for a low educational attainment level among Hispanas are difficult to quantify. Data are scarce. The most dramatic statistical picture shows up in the dropout rate of Hispanic females.

One in three Hispanic females drops out of high school. Their dropout rate is twice as high as the national dropout rate of 16%.[10]

In Denver, Promoting Equal Education Resources (PEER), a group of parents and concerned citizens seeking to eliminate sex discrimination from the schools,

found that one in every six Hispanas drops out of school.[11] Although this figure is much lower than the national dropout rate, Hispanic females in the Denver public schools are twice as likely as white, Black or Asian females to leave school before completing the 12th grade. The PEER study shows that Hispanics, male and female, are dropping out at almost identical rates.

Economic need, language barriers, family responsibility and educator attitudes are all contributors to the high dropout rate for Latinas, according to interviews with Hispanic women. Puerto Rican Hilda Frontany, a high school dropout who now serves as a human development staffer at Chicago's Latino Institute, says that she left school for "economic reasons." "One of my parents was very ill. I was behind in school, and I was the oldest in my class. I also had some unfavorable experiences related to culture. I got engaged in the perfectly respectable Latino fashion, and when I showed up at school, proudly displaying my engagement ring, the school responded with demerits as punishment."

In Houston, Tina Reyes, the first Mexican American woman to sit on the city school board, says that Latina dropout rates are so high because of peer pressure, the I'm-going-to-get-married-at-15-syndrome and high pregnancy rates.

Language is a second crucial problem. Reyes tells of a Latina teenager across the street from her who "left school because she didn't undersand what was going on in her classes and she couldn't stand the peer abuse anymore. So she dropped out. Now, she's working in a factory." But the magnitude of the language problem is illustrated best in the estimates that 3.6 million elementary and secondary school students are not fluent in English. Seventy percent of these students are Hispanic.[12]

"One in three Hispanic females drops out of high school. Their dropout rate is twice as high as the national dropout rate of 16%."

Family responsibilities are a third reason why Hispanic females leave school. Many young Hispanas are needed to manage the care of younger brothers and sisters while their parents work to support the families. Day care is neither affordable nor culturally acceptable. For other Hispanic families, the minimum wage jobs open to young women dropouts add to the family income.

And finally, the insensitivity of some educators might also contribute to Latina students' dropout rate.[13] Traditionally, attitudes toward Hispanic students are not always positive. "They have taken the attitude that we have a long tradition of school problems that aren't going to be changed overnight. So they have no expectations for our kids. They give worn-out socio-economic reasons as excuses for why our kids aren't doing well—excuses they use to keep them from doing anything," asserts one Southwestern Latina.

As another Latina puts it: "You know the thing I hated most about school was those teachers who acted like you were stupid just because you were Hispanic."

A Lack of Role Models

Hispanic leaders point to the absence of Hispanic role models in schools as a serious deficiency. Experts acknowledge that children are positively influenced by the presence of individuals with similar backgrounds or characteristics in roles that they might strive to fulfill as adults. Hispanic children represent six percent of the total public schools enrollment, only 3% of the more than 2 million classroom teachers are Hispanic.[14] Even fewer role models are found in the administrative ranks. Of the nation's 16,000 superintendents, 241 are female. A recent survey by the American Association of School Administrators identifies 100 Hispanic superintendents in 29 states, including California, New Mexico, Florida, Texas, Arizona, and Colorado. Only six are Hispanic females.[15]

Inadequate Counseling

Considering this absence of female and Hispanic leadership in education, the lack of attention given to the development of nonsexist, multi-ethnic counseling materials or the use of nondiscriminatory counseling practices is not surprising.

"Discuss my future with a counselor, are you kidding?," asked one Hispana. Another, a highly paid business development specialist in San Francisco, recounts: "While I was trying to figure out whether or not I needed English IV to get into college, my counselor—a male—was madly trying to get me enrolled in stenographic courses so I could make a living. If I'd paid any attention to him, college would have been the farthest thing from my mind." In Washington, D.C. a successful Latina journalist completed the picture. "I spent exactly five minutes with my male counselor who tried to dissuade me from seeking a writing career. He insisted that "not many of your kind seek careers of that sort," she remembered. Based on the interviews, it seems that if Hispanic girls are tracked at all, they are being tracked into traditional female courses.

Hispanic Women and Vocational Education

Vocational education enrollments clearly show that Hispanas are being steered into life cycles with little career or income potential. A good case in point is the Denver school system, where young minority women make up 44% of the total vocational education enrollments.[16] Ninety percent of these young women end up in home econom-

ics and clerical jobs—with little career potential and low pay. Female enrollments in the technical vocational fields which yield higher pay and a more secure future are very low. National statistics support these Denver findings—technical courses are dominated by white males (82.9%), with a tiny enrollment of Hispanas (1.8%).[17]

New Solutions a Priority

The education problems of Hispanas vary both in number and degree from city to city. Whatever the problem—language, teenage pregnancy, insensitive educators—the dropout rate is devastating. Finding constructive solutions is the major challenge. It is a challenge with growing implications for the entire country.

David Redondo, a program staffer with the League of United Latin American Citizens' (LULAC) Education Project working with dropouts, calls for the greater involvement of Latino parents, "not just to encourage and support the education of our kids, but to monitor what is happening to them in the schools and to affect change."

Holly Knox, director of the Project on Equal Education Rights (PEER) of the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund, would agree that parental involvement is key. The project she heads has been pursuing equal education rights for female students by organizing parent groups in various parts of the country. Through working with parents and students in Denver, PEER has been seeking to develop new solutions to the problems facing Hispanic women students. "Once the problems have been identified, voters and taxpayers have to stand up to the system and demand equal education for our kids—male and female, regardless of race or ethnic origin. When that happens, solutions appear," she says.

For the nation's Hispanas, it is urgent that the solutions come sooner rather than later. Poverty and joblessness are the alternative. Organizing to create the new solutions is the next step. As MANA's Raydean Acevedo says, "saber es poder . . . knowledge is power."

Footnotes

[1]U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Report, Persons of Spanish Origins in the United States: 1980 (Advance Report)*, Series P-20, No. 361, p. 5.

[2]U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Report Money Income of Households, Families and Persons in the United States*, Series P-60, No. 132, 1980.

[3]U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Report, Money, Income and Poverty, Status of Families and Poverty, Status of Families and Persons in the United States: 1981*, Series P-60, No. 134, pp. 14, 28.

[4]U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Selected Characteristics of Women Owned Businesses*, 1977, pp. 22-23.

[5]Telephone conversation in July 1982. Congressional Hispanic Caucus, House Office Building 3562, House Annex 2, Washington, D.C. 20515.

[6]U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Report, Population Profile in the United States*, Series P-20, No. 374, 1981, p. 37.

[7]U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Educational Attainment in the United States*, Series P-20, No. 356, 1979.

[8]U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Population Profile in the United States*, p. 37.

[9]U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Persons of Spanish Origin in the U.S.*, Series P-20, No. 354, p. 9.

[10]U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Condition of Education for Hispanic Americans*, 1980, p. 36.

[11]Juana Bordas, *The Denver PEER Report*, (Denver, Colorado, MiCasa Resource Center for Women, 1982), p. 6.

[12]"Bilingual Education—Some Facts and Figures," *Hispanics and Grantmakers: A Special Report of Foundation News*, (Washington, D.C., Council on Foundations, Inc. 1981), p. 53.

[13]Julian Samora, "La Familia de LaRaza," *Hispanics and Grantmakers: A Special Report of Foundation News*, (Washington, D.C., Council on Foundations, Inc., 1981), p. 7.

[14]Telephone conversation in July 1982. National Education Association, 1201 16th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C.

[15]Telephone conversation in November 1982. American Association of School Administrators, 1801 North Moore Street, Rosslyn, Virginia.

[16]Bordas, *The Denver PEER Report*, p. 5.

[17]U.S. Department of Education, *Fall 1979 Vocational Education Civil Rights Survey*, (Washington, D.C., 1979).

PEER, the Project on Equal Education Rights of the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund, works to end school practices, policies and attitudes that limit children's choices and keep them from learning the skills they will need for tomorrow's world. PEER offers communities across the country advice, information and in-depth training on how to initiate changes in schools.

Created in 1974, the project has received support from a number of sources, including the Carnegie Corporation, the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Family Fund, the Charles Stuart Mott Foundation, and the Women's Educational Equity Act Program, U.S. Department of Education.

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Writer: Elvira Valenzuela Crocker

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